Self-Pornographic Representations with Grindr

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"Sex is more than contact between body parts; it is contact between human beings who influence and are influenced by their communities." (Paris, 2011:129)

ABSTRACT

This article is an analysis of a cultural trend associated with the popularisation of new communication devices and a study about how this process influences social interactions and self-representations. It investigates how people create visual representations of themselves in the context of an online erotic socialisation.

The paper draws on the argument that an anthropologically informed research could show how some traditional sex elements are changing. More specifically, it inquires how being online – either with the use of dating portals or mobile apps - affects the way people interact sexually. This brings us to the analysis of an aesthetic universe which includes self-made pornographic images: the *naked selfies*.

INTRODUCTION

Internet and new mobile technologies have given birth to a revolution in the sphere of human relationships. It has not only changed the way we meet people, but also how we interact with acquaintances. From daily small talk to very intimate moments, these services act as a platform for our needs, marking a new era of social interaction.

The research for this paper began with a perception of this uniquely contemporary predicament brought about through modern technology: even though cruising areas have been an essential part of gay culture for decades, meeting people for sex (or at least the possibility of sex) has never been so easy. One of the main aspects of this interaction consists of the exchange of pornographic images. Behind this exchange is both a visual culture and new ways of using photography. The exchange process is primarily carried out through the internet. Although the internet is obviously a common ground for sexual activities and a very active market with millions of users worldwide, there is little research available on this particular topic. The exchange of amateur pornographic content on social networks is part of an unprecedented game of intimacy. This paper ethnographically examines the use of visual representations in social networks and the cultural effects of their erotic intentions. It explores the cultural aspect behind sexual behaviour. In this sense, it seeks to understand body representations and the production and exchange of self-pornographic images.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

First and foremost, it is important to contextualise the research in the history of anthropology as an academic subject. This research is an addition to the anthropology of sexuality. Like many subject fields, the anthropology of sexuality

remains an area that has not been fully explored. There have been substantial periods of time where little was written on the topic. Although a vast amount of related literature exists, the anthropology of sexuality has not been a central focus of academia historically. Sexual anthropology retreated from the centre stage of academic anthropology because anthropologists sought scientific respectability and therefore excluded topics deemed not "serious enough" (Lyons:2006).

It wasn't until the middle of the 1970s that the anthropology of sexuality appeared. With the advent of the second wave of feminism, combined with a process of liberation for gays and lesbians and a new sexual prescription, anthropologists began new theoretical trends. One of these trends can be described as the interdisciplinary field of "porn studies". As Attwood and Smith (2014) explain, pornography has been a matter for public scrutiny and debate, often about morality. It is therefore not surprising that these issues have become the subject of increasing scholarly interest. According to them, pornography is now of interest for academics working across a range of disciplines such as psychologists, historians, art literary scholars and social scientists. They point out how scholarly interest in pornography has also been driven by technological changes - "The increasing accessibility provided by various media technologies has opened up the market for pornography"(2014:3).

In addition, it is still an area that requires more attention, especially when it comes to online aspects. As Attwood and Smith (2014) clarify, "porn is becoming an important part of increasing numbers of people's lives, although what that means to them is something we still know very little about." (2014:1). The means by which porn is produced and distributed have undergone rapid, radical and incremental change, however much of the popular discussions regarding those changes are still based on guesswork. It is nonetheless necessary to produce a broader consideration of the ways in which sex, technology and the individual are represented and experienced in contemporary societies.

The use of Internet and other technologies have a huge impact on urban social life. Although there are plenty of articles concerning online dating and apps, they usually deal with medical issues such as HIV and AIDS prevention. There still appears to be a lack of anthropological studies on the universe of sex in internet times. Engaging in a cyber-ethnography is indeed a challenge. Therefore, proposing an anthropology of sexuality in the digital age is an even more ambitious step because new theoretical perspectives and methodological questions that cannot be ignored need to be considered.

Although the aim of this research was to investigate the characteristics of people who participate in online sexual interaction, the study did not focus solely on cyber aspects. It would be a serious misconception to ignore the influence of electronic technologies, but also wrong to analyse social life and shared meanings in the internet without keeping in mind that face-to-face socialisation follows relationship traditions and old classical forms of representation. This has to be acknowledged in order to conduct a fieldwork that respects the social-scientific complexity of the issue.

Since analysing the whole impact of this sexual revolution goes far beyond the possibilities of a single research, this is only a condensed deliberation about one facade of these new forms of interaction: the production and exchange of self-pornographic images. More specifically, it focuses on the social meanings behind this new use of photography. The first step in research was to look into broader cultural aspects that might influence or express the usual representations and/or forms of sexual interactions. As a result, the starting theoretical point of this study comes from the evidence of the rise of a new generation of spontaneous pornographers. These producers of pornography are not trained directors, they are not working with porn stars nor monetarily profiting from their actions. They do not even perceive themselves as pornographers and might avoid the term pornography. They are,

however, producing and starring in their very own sexually explicit material: *naked selfies*.

A "PORNIFIED" AND OVERSHARING CULTURE

In order to understand why – and how – people are sharing naked selfies, it is essential to see them as a part of a shared culture. Therefore, the first step of the analysis is to understand what recent cultural changes boost the popularisation of this practice. One of the theoretical perspectives that could explain this depicts the rise of a porn culture or a 'pornification' of pop culture. In the book "Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked our Sexuality (Dines 2010)", the author tries to expose the consequences of what she describes as a saturation of porn in western culture.

Simply put, porn is now deeply embedded in our culture and shapes how we think about sex. For Dines, pornographic images have now become so extreme that what used to be considered hardcore is now known as mainstream pornography. Porn has "seeped into our culture and into our collective consciousness," (2010:42). According to Dines, the porn industry has grown in volume and power with far-reaching ramifications: "porn is a key driver of new technological innovations, shapes technological developments, and has pioneered new business models, which have then diffused into the wider economy." (2010:25). Dines' argument is that since people have increasingly started to consume porn, the representations of this industry have not only begun to infest media but also to shape our sexual lives.

In a similar way, Agger (in the book Over-sharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age, 2012) explains the effect of the porn industry not only on people's sex lives but also in the way they create self-representations. He describes porn as a male-dominated industry catering to male fantasies of dominance, and puts forward the concept of a "pornographic prism" to refer to the way in which we view and construct our own sexuality by watching porn. In other words, people would imagine themselves enacting roles played on the porn screen and then produce that image in their own amateur videos, their discourse and bedroom behaviour. We star in porn videos of our own lives, "learning how to have sex through this prism" (2012:46).

To explain how people are now so actively taking photos and posting them online,Agger uses the definition of "oversharing". According to him, people overshare when they interact with others through the screens of computers and smartphones. Oversharing happens when someone is divulging more of their inner feelings, opinions and sexuality than they would in person. For him, taking a naked selfie is the ultimate type of oversharing and would have a impact on our identity and sexuality. From this perspective, a naked selfie is a product of pornographic culture; one which is highly voyeuristic and exhibitionist and where sexual talk and imagery are abundant. "We inhabit a sexualized culture in which images of sexuality and sexualized bodies have become commonplace, available to anyone with a laptop or smartphone" (2012:20). Agger jokes that, in the future, Martian anthropologists will dissect why men post shirtless photos and soon thereafter photos of their erections. In a pornographic culture, this self-revelation has become mainstream.

We want to connect with others and internet dating is a new powerful tool for that. It is also clear that online representations are influenced by the process described as cultural pornification. Both cited studies may shed light on how sharing self-pornographic images is influenced by the opening of mainstream culture to pornography. In spite of that, they have problematic conclusions. Both lack of ethnographic data and both apply a limited concept of pornography, only being normative and defending a political anti-porn approach. By merely seeing porn as a business whose product evolves with a specifically capitalist logic, consisting only of amateurish copycats, the ability of porn consumers and producers to act as creative subjects is ignored.

AN ETHNOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF PORNOGRAPHY

Available studies on the subject of pornography definitely raise many relevant questions on the matter and help explain the culture which the production of self-pornographic images is a part of. Nonetheless, the lack of ethnographical research on those studies lead to a twisted conclusion. Despite some very insightful explanations on the context of the subject matter, they fail to acknowledge the voice of the very people they analyse. Observations are based solely on how the subject is portrayed in media or on their own notions and prejudice about pornography, instead of trying to understand such behaviour from the point of view of who is actually practising it. For this reason, only an ethnographical approach could reveal the true intentions behind such images, although it is useful to use these theoretical discussions as a starting point. The critical perception of the issue is revealing, but does not delve deep enough.

Using Agger's metaphor, I am not a Martian anthropologist intrigued by photos of erect penises, but I do have a strategic position that allows me to carry out this ethnographical study from an insider perspective: I am one of the individuals sending and receiving such images. I do consider this an advantage, since being a part of the studied group saves me time in the process of integration. Although this has its advantages it also raises a number of problems. The task of being auto-ethnographic demands an even higher level of self-reflection and an attempt to stay constantly critical about your own behaviour. Another risk is to consider certain actions 'normal', being unable to recognise what an outsider would perceive quickly - after all, the goal is to present a truly anthropological research and not simply an excuse for one's own behaviour.

As an anthropologist, my discussion does not intend to classify the way in which one acts or conducts oneself as morally wrong, nor to defend any behaviour as positive. The efforts are directed towards understanding how individuals, as part of a culture of shared representations, act reciprocally in such a way as to have an effect on one another.

The cited studies about porn hijacking our culture and over-sharing are theoretical research approaches with no proper ethnographical study. Their conclusions are impregnated with stereotypes and moral judgments that condemn pornography, citing it as the cause for a loss of self-respect and humiliation.

In order to properly understand how people consider pornographic meanings, it is important to see how they are involved in a dynamic process of interaction and construction of meaning or interpretation. Pornography is more than visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, it is a symbolic comprehensive activity. That is to say that the property of being pornographic isn't an intrinsic one of anything. Conversely, pornographic meanings are built and shared when people are interacting. Instead of adopting a pessimistic definition of pornographic, it is much more useful for an anthropological study to approach this matter with a symbolic, interactionist approach. This perspective stems from a few premises. The first is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. Second, is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises through, social interaction. Also, these meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. This social interaction is an interaction between actors, not between factors imputed to them (Blumer, 1886).

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the studied case is clearly visually-oriented, the interpretation of visual materials collected was a central research method. This was based on the explanation of the image given by the users themselves – so it would be possible to read the symbolic meanings that flow around them. The ethnography gathered data via informal interviews, conducted both online and offline. Nevertheless "what people

say they believe and say that they do are often contradicted by their behaviour" (Woodsong 2005:13). Therefore, this methodology would not suffice. In order to learn the perspectives held by the group, the applied methodology also consisted of participant observation on dating websites and smart-phone apps – a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research. Finally, it was also important to pay attention to the results based on my own auto-ethnographic experience, providing a critical understanding of my personal position as part of the same group that I study - I did not deny my participation in the social field described.

It is also crucial to clarify the legal and ethical issues that concern this research. First, despite the fact that most interviews were conducted in an informal manner, no quote was used before the consent of the interviewed person. It has always been important to me to consider that I was dealing with something very private and I should respect this. The presented ethnography will have no intention to expose nor damage the image of the people studied. For this reason, even with a proper permission, I will withhold the names of those included to maintain anonymity. The term "user" is used instead of a name as a generic form referring to the different interviewees. In addition, another decision I took as a strategic academic position: no pornographic images would be displayed in the thesis in order to avoid the scenario that the thesis itself could be considered pornographic.

Throughout my research, I observed the most popular gay apps for online cruising. In most european cities, Grindr is the most popular option. For this reason, most of my research and observations are about this specific app. However, the ethnography was not restricted to Grindr. It also considered other apps such as Hornet, Scruff and PlanetRomeo. To find guys in your area, simply launch Grindr, create an account, upload an optional photo and profile details and browse for men in your area who want to chat and meet.

When using Grindr, you can click on a picture in the mosaic to open the profile of the person in the picture. As soon as you do this, you can see a bigger version of the photo and the person's information is displayed. If you allow the location-based feature on your phone, it will also indicate the distance between you and the other user. Hornet is very similar to Grindr, but could be described as an improved version of it – an interviewed user said it was "the gay dating app that Grindr should have been". Another popular app is Scruff. It is slightly different from the other apps because it focuses on a specific subgroup from the gay culture: the erotic category of *bears* or gay users that identify themselves as sexually attracted to *bears*, a slang used to describe overweight/muscular hairy men. Finally, another app that was used often during the research was PlanetRomeo, a very popular app in Berlin.

Since my first experience using the apps, it was possible to state the importance of the image exchange. After a few casual text messages, the next step is to start the visual dialogue: "Do you have more pictures" or "Can I see more of you?" are common questions. One can also say that sexting has become a common practice in this flirting activity. In simple terms, sexting can be understood as a neologism that joints the words sex and text. And yet when blended with the noun sex, sexting becomes more than written words. Sexting involves sending sexual or pornographic photos and videos. Text and images exchanged blur the boundary between text and image, which is crucial for this kind of pornographic representation.

Although the phenomenon of producing and sharing pornographic self-portraits only started to appear recently with the popularization of the internet, it would be a mistake to consider this a totally new and separate subject. This research cannot be seen as part of a completely separate field – as explained in the first chapter of this thesis which relates the study to a wider anthropological context. Because of this, prior theoretical considerations cannot be ignored and also there is no need to invent completely new methodologies. It is still useful to practice certain elements of classical ethnographical field work, but of course with an updated application.

An approximation between the online universe of computers, smartphones and tablets still exists but with a wider dimension of the social life shared between the users of these technologies. You cannot investigate reality only through a computer screen. Although part of the fieldwork might be what is considered cyber-ethnography - with the analyses of the online profiles, it is not enough to investigate the issue only through an online perspective. Since the research is about a virtuality that is a way to find material sex partners, it goes beyond the cyber. With this in mind, it is also useful to keep elements of classical ethnographic field work in the attempt to carry out a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research.

REPRESENTING AN ONLINE NAKED SELF DURING EROTIC CONTACT: A SYMBOLICIC INTERACTIONISM APPROACH

How can we explain the recent habit of taking naked self-portraits? What is particular about this method of self-fashioning and communication? In a recent study (The Selfie: Making sense of the "Masturbation of Self-Image" and the "Virtual Mini-Me" by Alise Tifentale 2014), it is explained why selfies are a form of new image-making and image-sharing technology. It is historically time-specific in the sense that it could materialize only in the moment when several technologies reached a certain level of development and accessibility such as easy availability to an internet connection – including WiFi – smartphones with cameras and software that allow online image sharing, geo-tagging of uploaded images among other features. Regardless of the fact that taking self-portraits is nothing new, the act of taking a selfie implies new use of photography because we are talking about something with no predecessors: smartphones that are connected to internet function as networked cameras, "presenting a new and hybrid image-making and simultaneously image-sharing practice" (2014:3).

In other words, selfies are a new digital image-making and online image-sharing practice that can be understood as a new social phenomenon. They can be seen as a "hybrid phenomenon of vernacular photography and social media" (Tifentale 2014:3). Despite these factors, it is still necessary to study the selfie practice within the larger context of the history of photography and self-portraiture. "Selfies" can be interpreted as an emerging sub-genre of self-portraiture; as an example of a digital turn in vernacular photography as well as a side product of the recent technological developments. "Photography can easily be used as a tool for constructing and performing the self. Photographic self-portraits offer ultimate control over our image, allowing us to present ourselves to others in a mediated way" (2014:9). Those photos are produced with what can be considered bad quality photography, using webcams, smartphones or cheap digital cameras. The amateur style is not avoided, but embraced. It gives a sense of reality and honesty.

But even if selfie producers choose to believe otherwise, they are still building a representation. In their daily life, both on and offline, individuals present themselves to others while maintaining a certain impression. In this way, they develop a self-image according to their representation strategies, articulating symbolic meanings that match their intentions and expectations in a determined location. The analysed images that are shared between the users appear not as simple self-portraits, but also as a form of interaction that leads users to finally meet. Meanings are articulated around the erotic exploration that depends on the production, circulation and consumption of photography. That is to say, this photography has a very specific use: a self-presentation for erotic purposes. People produce and use pornographic photographs so they can hold and shape needed codes of communication, building meanings to their social life. It has two goals: they are arguments that signal to others that the subject is an object of sexual desire, and they are also a form of exposure, in the sense that they offer support to the text and the description also present in the profiles.

This idea is present in Goffman's work. According to his perspective, we are always performing roles. Choosing from a set of possible actions, expressions and symbols, people make available to the audience some information about themselves in order to sustain an impression. All this information works in regards to the definition of an interactive situation (Goffman 1985).

Although Goffman could not experience our internet times, the analytical profitability of his theories easily applies to studies in cyber-culture. Quoting Lima (2009): "In the cyber-culture, users have access to resources and tools that make them able to produce their own discourses, representations, e-narratives and, therefore, publish images, texts, sounds, videos, narrating the world and themselves while finding a position as subjects, conforming cyber-identities and making their self-representations visible" (2009:10).

As Lemos (2003:7) suggests, cyber communities bring different possibilities of social interaction. Therefore, they are a new phenomenon of (re)presentation of the self in everyday life, transporting Goffman's theatrical metaphor to the cyberspace with the birth of new relations mediated by the available cyber-culture's technologies. Shared pornographic images are part of this cyber-representation. Goffman explains that someone can represent different roles because there is the possibility of segregating the audience, which guarantees that those in front of a certain role will not be the same when someone chooses a different representation (p.28). Representation takes place inside a determined region. A region is defined as any limited space with barriers that offers a controlled perception. This means that when a user performs his virtual roles, including pornographic representations, he can still hide this from his close circle of friends and family.

According to this perspective, when a user logs in, he will try to control the impression that the other users have of the situation. He will learn some common techniques to employ in order to sustain such impressions and common contingencies associated with the employment of these techniques. Therefore, performance is "the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers (Goffman 1985:9)." In this sense, another useful concept from Goffman is the notion of "front". This is described as the part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. "Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (1985:13).

Public profiles on hook-up devices can be understood as the front. This more public performative space is a vital part of the cyber-representation. After all, it is the starting point of the interaction. In everyday life there is a clear understanding that first impressions are important. Goffmann clarifies this: "When the interaction that is initiated by first impressions is itself merely the initial interaction in an extended series of interactions involving the same participants, we speak of getting off on the right foot and feel that it is crucial that we do" (1985:12).

GAY CRUSING: BEYOND CYBERSEX

The online exchange of pornographic self-portraits or sexting can be described as cybersex. It is a new era of social interaction and cybersex is one of its new forms. Cybersex means "when two or more people engaged in simulated sex talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure" (Daneback 2005:325). According to Daneback's research, homosexual men were over four times more likely to have cybersex compared to heterosexual men. He explains this with the fact that gay men pioneered social uses of the internet and were among the first to search the corners of cyberspace for sex partners. In addition, these groups are more open to less traditional types of sexual activities. Therefore, "in many places where openly seeking homosexual experiences could still have major adverse

consequences, cyberspace might be the safest place for them to express their sexuality" (2005:326).

A problem with the term "cybersex" is that it is rather limited and anachronistic, because the users use those virtual means as a way of finding material sex partners. Instead, the term of "online hook-ups" or "cruising" imply the idea that those interactions go beyond the cyber level. In addition, it would be a serious mistake to ignore the history of the same practice. Despite the fact that internet and mobile apps offer an easy way of finding sexual encounters, cruising is not something created by those technologies, but a long-dated cultural practice. A study solely focused on the cyber aspects would be incomplete. It cannot ignore the influence of electronic technologies, but it would also be insufficient to analyse social life and shared meanings on the internet without considering that there is a face-to-face socialisation that follows relationship traditions and old classical forms of representation. There is no other way of conducting a field work that respects the social-scientific complexity of the issue.

It is therefore useful to understand the practice of cruising and its history. Online cruising has a precedent in a very common ritual: anonymous encounters in public spaces in order to perform sexual activities. Although it is obviously not an exclusively homosexual activity, it appears to be a custom more typical between men who have sex with other men. This might have two reasons. First, in many places – or in other times in history – engaging in this kind of behaviour is/was forbidden by law or perceived negatively by the majority. Homosexuality has long been condemned and repressed for different reasons, which decidedly makes the possibility of fulfilling some desires very limited. This would restrict the ways of meeting someone and thereby, cruising is a good solution: sexual fulfilment with strangers, no strings attached and limited chances of exposure. Second, cruising has become part of what can be labelled "gay culture", which is itself over-sexualised.

Cruising comes from city life, when people could gather anonymously and meet a partner. Cruising areas are essentially spots of instant gratification. But what happens with this practice in an era of sexual liberation? Applying technology to cruising has a long history in the gay community. After the libertine sexuality of the '70s, phone-sex lines appeared - dating back to the mid-'80s according to Seth Michael Donsky in the article 'More Sex Faster: The Grindr Story' (2012). He also describes the popularisation of erotic sex sites (such as Manhunt and Adam4AdaM) when internet became more accessible.

Dating profile websites opened the market for a more specific purpose: online cruising. Internet definitely has had a huge impact on contemporary sexuality. It can offer some elements of traditional cruising – such as staying anonymous or meeting someone for sex without the need of interacting with the same person after the encounter is over. Despite the fact that the first available popular technology for cybersex was chat-rooms, where under a nickname users could fantasize and experiment with sex while exchanging messages, there arose some complications when the intention for using them was cruising. Chat-rooms had the disadvantage of being too impersonal – and soon a generalised notion that everyone was actually faking their own description destroyed the feeling of authenticity of the sexual interaction. Dating websites would offer a more "real" experience, in the sense that they would force the user to create a visual description and include a photograph, instead of only a self-description in words. Also, they offer a location-based search that allows users to actually find offline partners instead of being restricted to cybersex. The internet experience is more remote, interior and hidden from the straight world, which almost certainly makes it more acceptable, thus opening up new opportunities for cruising.

The erotic visual play that starts online when exploring profiles has the goal of finding users that are geographically close to you and share some aesthetic and erotic preferences. The production of pornographic images are strategic: they are meant to hold and shape needed codes of communication.

EROTIC REPRESENTATIONS AND THE PRAISE OF THE MACHO

If in the early stages of anthropology, ethnographers would find themselves isolated in what, for European standards at the time, was seen as exotic, little did they know how strange their own tribe could be. While doing my research, in the cyber-jungle of online sex, I found photographs of a strange tribe: a tribe of headless yellow men. A selection of photographs received in Grindr would easily exemplify the general aesthetic of the naked pictures shared between the users. The pictures are usually cropped under the shoulders, emphasizing the torso with a non-artistic aesthetic being the usual. Most of the shared photos were taken inside the user's home, so the lighting in bathrooms or bedrooms give the photos a yellowish tone. Why do they crop their faces? And why does the photographer not attempt to produce better quality photography?

When confronted with the choice to hide their faces, the general answer was in regard to privacy or fear that the picture might spread throughout the internet. As one user explained: "It was more important for me when I started and I wasn't self-confident as a gay male. So I was very attentive to details in my photos like watches, rooms or background-items. I didn't want to be identified completely. I always remove the head if it is on the original pic. I guess I don't want to have it popping out in the internet so that everyone can see how big my cock is". The amateur style is not avoided, but fully embraced. It gives a sense of reality and honesty. "A lot of nudes I get are not well-made. They are too close-up or too dark or messy", one of the users complained. But this is not because there is a lack of capacity of producing clearer images - it is just the usual aesthetic. When sending pictures that look too professional or that were digitally altered, users might complain about the lack of honesty in a profile. The use of image-editing softwares such as *Photoshop* is seen in a very negative way: "Guys should never use photoshop in the pics, it's the same as writing down a fake description", one of the users pointed out. Also body close ups are often requested during the exchange. "I think they give the best overview of my current body, the size of my cock, the form of my ass and how thin I am. This is mostly the kind of information I want others to know." stated one user.

Another interesting element of the photographs is that in a significant number of images the apparatus shooting the photo is present within the frame. Including the image-making technology of the camera is not new, it goes back over a century and a half in the history of self-portraiture in photography. But representing this hyper-mediated aspect of a lived experience is actually a strategy to establish credibility and demonstrate how authentic the presence of someone is, even though it is mediated through a viewer or screen. It is explicitly a way to communicate trustworthiness (Losh 2014).

This proves that there is a shared notion that the exchanged photographs are somehow "true", although they are in fact built representations. This social media-driven narcissism works in a way that selfies are used to convey a particular impression of oneself. The most praised representation in gay hook-up apps is definitely the ones that embrace super-masculine characteristics, such as, for example, *bears* – that emphasise their beard and body hair or *jocks* – exhibiting their muscular torsos. What is presented in the gay cruising devices is a very excluding "homo-masculinity".

As Will H. Courtenay (2000) explains, gender is constructed from cultural and subjective meanings that constantly shift and vary, depending on the time and place. Gender stereotypes provide collective, organised – and usually dichotomous – meanings of gender, often becoming widely shared beliefs. People are encouraged to conform to dominant norms and conforming to what is expected of them further reinforces self-fulfilling prophecies of such behaviour. But this does not mean that individuals are not active agents in constructing and reconstructing their identity. It is important to clarify, therefore, that there is not only one absolute concept of masculinity. Although masculinity is understood to be one part of a dualistic gender structure, it is essential for this present thesis to avoid an essentialist viewpoint.

Looking at gender through this constructionist lens can help explaining the idea of a homo-masculinity.

The task of defining masculinity can be quite difficult. From a constructionist point of view, this definition can be found by contrasting different types of masculinity, namely heterosexual and homosexual. This view depicts gender, and therefore masculinity, in a state of flux, changing with every shift in definition of our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the rest of society (Bradley:2001). The cultural notion of masculinity implies that the penetration role is the masculine role. As Judith Butler (1990) describes, there is a "heterosexual matrix" that is a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female). When a person is assigned a specific biological sex at birth, they are not only given a certain gender role; they are also prescribed a particular sexual script. Not only does this gender script place restriction on the gender roles of heterosexuals, it also creates quite a paradox for homosexuals.

When examining homo self-representations, there is usually a very distinctive attempt of going as far as possible from identity modes that would threaten an individual's perceived masculinity. A common discourse is "I am gay but still a man". The homo-erotic desire is safe as long as there is a legitimate masculinity. Remarkably there are a lot of investigations about this matter that endeavour to evaluate why – or how – representations of masculinity play a role in the homo culture. In a text about macho men and queer imagery, Sonnekus (2009) analyses representations of what he describes as homo-masculinity. He explains that the contemporary presence of hyper-masculine aesthetics are a response to "being expected to behave like men" or – in other words, a masculine performance that is imposed by stereotypes and internalised homophobia. As a result, gay men often fashion themselves after archetypal masculine icons: a romanticised man – with a heterosexual-like behaviour – that will not carry the stigma of being associated with effeminate queers.

According to this perspective, it is necessary to first explore what exactly is meant by homo-masculinity, and how this gendered construct functions at the expense of marginalising certain gay men. Sonnekus then tries to understand the construction of a "macho" gay body and its accoutrements, that become a site of resistance. It is a way of experiencing a straight-acting performance and "rejecting stereotypical, effeminate gay characteristics in favour of 'highly charged' (hyper) and stylised performances of masculinity that are accompanied by 'the exaggeration of sexual characteristics'." (Sonnekus 2009:38).

Curtis M. Kularski (2013) goes even further with this train of thought, affirming that gay sadomasochism is the ultimate hyper-masculine performance. Similarly to Sonnekus, he explains that gay men are excluded from the hegemonic definition of masculinity by the socially created norms and values that define masculinity. In addition, the rules of masculinity are not entirely fixed and men often fail to meet the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. They may call upon a hyper-masculine performance to ensure their status of masculine and sadomasochism can be seen as an enactment of a hyper-masculine performance. Hyper-masculine aesthetics result from gay men's response to being expected to behave like men and from a masculine performativity. As a result, there is a very ideal type of gay beauty which in turn is affected by racist ideologies.

Homo-erotic visual culture also prioritizes the white skinned man for its media representations. Early American 'Western' films positioned cigarette smoking as an explicit symbol of male virility (Starr 1984:54). The gay culture fetishised this representation because this process eradicates the violent, racist history of colonialism. When seen as desirable physical qualities for gay men, they are "based on a stifling stereotype of gay identity that obscures the race-based power relations within which it operates" (Sonnekus, 2009:40). It is not uncommon for users to write "no Asians please" on their profile description of hook-up apps. As one user

explained during an interview: "I'm not racist, I just have sexual preferences. I don't like Asian boys, they just don't turn me on.". But again, this reflects an internalised racism also linked with sexist notions. Gay Asians are often described by users as not being masculine enough. Sonnekus (2009) explains: "the feminisation of gay Asian men appears to be so ingrained that "relationships between them are contemptuously defined as 'lesbianism' by other gay Asians who prefer white partners" (2009:45). According to him, this is reflected in pornographic stereotypes - white men are often portrayed full-frontally as 'tops', having their white male cock as a symbol of manhood, and Asian men are shown mostly from the back suggesting that their most desirable attribute is their ass, a 'bottom' that is seen as adopting the traditionally feminine sexual position. Gay blacks also internalise the supposed primacy of white masculinity and the aesthetics or physical 'ideals' that accompany it, since they are more likely to explicitly exclude 'blacks', even more so than gay white men, when seeking out companionship. Sonnekus' conclusion is that "straight-acting" white men "forge stronger masculine identities by consuming, and defining themselves in opposition to feminine others" (2009:50).

Some authors describe this process as "homo-normative", born out of a wish for integration and tolerance, but this in itself is restrictive about the possibilities of inventing a sexuality and enjoying sexual pleasures (Galán & Sanchéz 2006). In other words, this homo-normative view values certain practices and lifestyles, creating hierarchies and exclusion between homosexuals. Therefore, those hegemonic forms appear as aesthetic norms that influence the process of shaping the materiality of a body and exclude bodies that are considered to have limited seductive attributes. Grindr is no Peter Pan land, but old age appears as a stigma. The overexploitation of youth – and the consequent kingship of the "twink" stereotype – causes a weird kind of gerascophobia (the fear of growing old) because ageing means losing the erotic value of the body. In Le Breton's anthropology of the body, he explains that while ageing, the individual singularity is erased under a unique cliché of the damaged body. The modern man constantly fights against his age and, when old, loses his place in the field of communication(Le Breton 2013). Nobert Elias (2001) writes about the loneliness associated with old age, stating that it is not easy to imagine that our own body, so fresh and full of pleasant sensations, may become slow, tired and clumsy. People resist the idea of their own ageing. For Elias, this explains why ageing produces a fundamental change in the social position of a person and consequently, also in his relations with others. As Elias remembers, there is not only a frustration of sexual needs – that can still be very active – but also a dislocation in every kind of social interaction (Elias 2001).

These concepts were very evident in my research. There is clearly a general ageist attitude where older users are deemed unworthy of attention. Age limits are often publicly stated in many profiles, setting very clear limits for possible interactions. In spite of the fact that younger users are mostly looking for users around their age, older users also are not ashamed to manifest their preference to younger users. Generally the older looking the user, the less known or clearly stated is his age. Under-twenties frequently reveal their age in their nicknames (examples: 19_BLN, boy18bi, youngbottom19) and social apps have a tool to filter the users you will see in your grid according to their age - youth is clearly a highly appreciated symbolic value for the online gay community.

In this sense, it is interesting to point out a similar research project about experiences of homoerotism by older men (Santos & Lagos 2013). While meeting and interviewing attendees of a gay bar in the south of Brazil, the researchers could observe some "stylistics, aesthetics and ethics of homoeroticism in older men's self narratives". Trying to analyse how subjects would stylise their ageing according to their sexuality, they came to the conclusion that the narratives always express a historically-based notion shared by a group. To represent yourself as "an old homosexual" is to be a part of a historic ontology that is about their conditions and possibilities of subjectivity. This is strictly connected to the perception of the body. There are discursive lines that shape behaviours and relations, like a moral field. But,

at the same time, researchers recognise the capacity of a creative re-invention, which means that there is a possibility of producing an aesthetic in which life can be lived as an art form: there are ways of aesthetic representations of ageing as a homosexual. In other words, there are hegemonic models in the process of constructing a sexuality. Identities are not fixed, there is no unchangeable being. If there is a heterosexual matrix that rules most processes of subjectivity, there are also strategies that are born from desires that bring possibilities of creating a life that is not imprisoned by the system (Santos & Lagos 2013).

The available positions follow norms that someone can accept or escape, producing a subjective body discourse that confronts the aesthetic rules. At the same time that older users might be dismissed by younger users, another perspective is that older gay men might now experience their sexuality more freely, something which was more strictly regulated in the past. Another possible scenario is that the intergenerational factor is eroticised and becomes a fetish. This changes the value of some categories such as "daddies" or "twinks". It also brings to the erotic market the fantasised dad-son relationship. This is very easily identifiable in some profiles of older users, one way of doing this is by representing yourself as someone of the upper class or in a good financial position.

It is a fact that the homonormativity present in gay hook-up apps is also present in offline life. Thoughts expressed online or through apps are not trapped there; people take these beliefs with them throughout their daily life. After pointing out earlier examples of representation, showing how they incorporate stereotypes from the gay culture – that it is itself contaminated by sexist, heteronormative and racist notions – it is also important to state that this does not place users as non-reflexive consumers or imitators of a porn culture. Agreeing that there is a normative culture that impacts the process of creating a representation does not mean that the body is not a plastic material, something which is shapeable and can hold multiple meanings for different possible paths of affection. Nobody is fatally condemned to rigid significations. Even the body of an older homosexual is not destined to be seen only as decant or undesirable. Older gay men can escape the discourse norm around it and reinvent the meaning of the body in an unexpected way.

In pornographic representations there is clearly a norm. But, as explained before, this does not force people to imitate what they are being exposed to. It is undeniable that those representations also generate new stereotypes and incorporate old norms of representations that are very restrictive and excluding. In this sense, the "over-masculinised" type of gay online cruising apps can be interpreted as a dominant representation that occupy a privileged position ruling out many other groups.. Still, there is a way of regarding self-pornographic representations as a creative response to the pornographic images.

At the same time that there is a lot of exclusive attitudes from users that state their preferences in their profile without being ashamed, there are also a lot of users that criticise this behaviour. Recently there have been many articles on popular gay media websites that criticise those norms of representation. Despite the fact that these norms are not recent and reflect the normative attitude of an already existing culture, there seems to be an increasingly critical attitude about it.

Even though pornographic representations are regulated, there are also networks that produce sexually explicit material in alternative spaces. Katrien Jacobs (2007) proves this point when she talks about the rise of an "alternative" pornography on the web that can be defined as the production or distribution of a work outside the established, traditional system. This means that, in spite of the fact that pornography has become an organised industry, controlling many sectors of the digital entertainment industries, the internet also opens up space for unconventional and alternative pornography. It also facilitates DIY (do-it-yourself) porn, creating a collective imagery that can "reject the porn space of popular brands to make and distribute radical kinds of netporn imagery" (2007:33). It would not be a mistake to consider self-pornographic representations shared in apps as a kind of alternative

porn, where similarly people can experience a non-commercial type of consumerism or sexual communication.

VISUAL MARKET: A GIFT ECONOMY

Users of these applications have in common that they constantly search for partners and crave affection and sexual experiences. For Couto (2013), this online exhibition is a way for users to present themselves as a desirable good. These apps also show how relations can become part of an exchange game similar to economical transactions. In a culture that over-values consumption, it is also logical that our bodies, sensations and emotions are also turned into merchandise. This also reflects Lipovetsky's (2006:6) idea that hyper- consumption seeks less having products as accumulated property and more as a multiplication of experiences, sensations and new emotions: to find happiness in new adventures that do not offer many risks.

Understanding how individuals portray themselves reveals that the intention is very specific: they are producing something to exchange. Cyber-sharing shows both a new form of interaction and also a new relation with the practice of photography itself. The exchanging activity is not only an interaction, but also a silent contract. The fact that both sides will hold naked pictures of each other is safety that puts both in the same situation, a way of avoiding the other sharing the photos that are sent. As a result, the exchange must always be reciprocal. A person will only receive naked pictures if they are willing to send some in return.

Adding a classically anthropological interest to the discussion helps understand the logic of this exchange: sharing intimate photographs can be compared with gift economies. As McGlotten explains (2013), gift economies produce ongoing cycles of exchange and reciprocation that effect and reinforce bonds between groups. Mauss described how an exchange can build relationships between humans. A gift exchange is the opposite of a monetary transaction: it holds the essence of reciprocity; the rule is to give, receive and re-tribute (Mauss 2003:243).

Each of these obligations creates a link between the gift exchangers. The fact that a return must take place is explained by the existence of a force inside the gift itself, what Mauss would describe using the Polynesian concept of "mana". In a gift economy, the soul and gifts are blended. The context of an online hook-up market is somehow similar to a gift economy. There is – at least usually – no money involved, but the process is much more than simply sending naked pictures to strangers. When photos are shared, users are performing more than a simple exchange, they are creating links and a mutual notion of virtual intimacy.

CONCLUSION

Recently, the pornography experience took on two massive changes. The first (and most obvious one) came with the democratisation of the Internet. This boosted meanings that were generated by an industry, spreading a porn culture that still influences erotic desires and sexual experiences. A second, more recent, is occurring now with the increased use of smart-phones. At no previous point in history have so many people produced and shared their own amateur pornography. Pornography is becoming a form of creating new configurations of intimacies. Within the boundaries of the research, a trend could be identified: pornography is becoming more about engaging in a visual dialogue than consuming an industrial product. It is creating new possibilities for people to experiment and engage with one another. On the other hand, it is also generating very fragile and unfulfilling relationships.

It can be concluded that self-pornographic photographs can be read as a product of the symbolic market, a consequence of a different attitude towards

pornography when people start producing their own images more often instead of/or in addition to consuming from the porn industry. Their pornographic representations are indeed still impregnated with stereotypes – such as sexist and racist conceptions, but this ethnographic research rejects the idea that such behaviour puts users of online cruising devices as mere imitators of mainstream pornography or victims of an over-sexualised culture.

There still remain many related issues and unanswered questions about the new ways of producing, consuming and experiencing pornographic meanings. Although this topic might be unconventional for academic purposes, this research stands as an attempt to aid in fulfilling the lack of anthropological studies concerning this matter. It concludes that pornography is not a frivolous topic, but part of an intriguing, shared culture with meanings that are constantly changing and floating around a web of interactions. It is time for an Anthropology of Pornography.

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